

## Student Privacy and Instructor/Adviser Gossip\*

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Dr. Sheila Stone is a faculty adviser for undergraduates majoring in Humanities at a large research university. Her advising caseload is upwards of 500 students. She rarely finds time to schedule meetings to consult with other advisers around campus or at other universities about difficult issues or questions that arise when she is advising. Instead, when she has a question or needs to vent about difficult appointments she logs on to her favorite social media, Facebook. Most of the other faculty advisers that she knows are also members of Facebook. Lately, she has been getting more and more frustrated with freshmen and sophomore students. It seems to her like these students increasingly have a sense of entitlement about their course grades, scholarships, awards, and other considerations.

One afternoon during the busy registration period, she met with John, an ambitious sophomore Humanities major. Dr. Stone began the appointment by asking John what kinds of questions he had about his upcoming schedule.

“That’s not what I am here for, actually,” John replied. “My schedule is all set. I’m here because I plan to go to grad school and a Fulbright would really look good on my applications. I would like a letter of recommendation from you for one.”

When Dr. Stone said that she didn’t know John well enough to comment on his academic merit or his ability to do original research in his humanities discipline, John became visibly upset. He explained his plans to take her course next year when it fits in to his schedule but for now, he is willing to come to all her office hours so that she can get to know him. After she explained that is not the way the process works, she outlined the steps that he needs to take, including setting up a meeting with the institution’s adviser for prestigious scholarships. She suggested that he postpone applying for the fellowship until his junior or senior year, when he had followed through with the steps she recommended.

Clearly agitated, John rebutted that his parents pay out of state tuition and that if necessary he’ll have his parents call the chair of the department who can put pressure on her to recommend him. On his way out of the office, John added, “I had heard that you weren’t very sympathetic. Everyone warned me that you are a difficult adviser to work with. They were right.”

After John leaves, Dr. Stone logs on to Facebook and posts the following message on her public wall:

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*Dr. Stone: Hitting my head against a wall after last appointment. Ungrateful sophomore student threatened to have his parents call and tattle on me. How immature can you get? Any advice?*

Over the course of the next few hours, a number of her Facebook friends—all faculty advisers at her own institution and elsewhere—comment on the thread:

**Dr. Jones:** *What did you do that made the brat want to tell on you?*

**Dr. Stone:** *I told him that I wouldn't recommend him for the Fulbright, at least not yet. I advised him how he could prepare. Research recommendations. Classes, including mine. I hardly know him. At this point, he's just a name. How much sense does it take to know that a professor cannot wave a wand to make a convincing recommendation appear? He should be glad I didn't laugh at him to his face, really. And then he had the gall to insult me as he walked out the door!*

**Dr. Sampris:** *Seriously?!? "Hi Dr. Stone, I know that you have no idea who I am, and I know that you have not seen any of my work, but would put yourself on record and make a bunch of stuff up about how great I am and about why I deserve a Fulbright?" lol*

**Dr. Jones:** *What does he think his parents can do about this?*

**Dr. Stone:** *@Dr. Sampris – EXACTLY! lol*

*@Dr. Jones - Apparently his father is some Fortune 500 executive type who is used to getting what he wants. The kid thinks that if daddy complains to my chair, he'll get a Fulbright out of it.*

**Dr. Jones:** *A couple of years ago, I had a student "ask" me to write a scholarship letter two days before the due date!!! When I told him that I didn't have the time, he had the nerve to tell me that it "was part of my job."*

**Dr. Smith:** *I can top that! Last semester I agreed to MEET with a student to TALK about writing him a letter for his grad school application. Next thing I know, I am getting emails from a half-dozen schools explaining how to upload my letters to their application systems. That was the week BEFORE our scheduled meeting!!*

**Dr. Stone:** *@Dr. Jones & Dr. Smith – Really?!? Unbelievable!! These kids are just absolutely clueless!!*

**Dr. Jones:** *You should just write him an awful letter: "I'm writing in 'support' of X. X's grades seem pretty good, but I have no personal knowledge of his abilities. I can tell you that in my little experience with him, I can verify that he has no commonsense; nor does he understand social norms." That would kill his application in a heartbeat.*

**Dr. O'Keefe:** *I dealt with a similar situation a couple of weeks ago. They just don't know how things are done. You should email him your advice. Create a paper trail in case junior does cry to daddy and your chair gets involved.*

**Dr. Stone:** *@ Dr. O'Keefe – Good call. Never hurts to protect yourself in the days of the "customer's" always right in higher ed. Thanks for the tip!*

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## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Do you think that Dr. Stone violated John's right to privacy or confidentiality? If so, how? If not, why not? Have any of the other individuals mentioned in the case done anything to undermine their students' privacy? Is there anything else wrong with this Facebook discussion?
2. When, if ever, is it appropriate to discuss one's students in a public forum? Is there a difference between venting about a student's rude or insulting behavior and discussing other aspects of a student meeting? Is there a difference between posting on a website like Facebook and posting in an advising newsletter or other professional forum, like the *Chronicle of Higher Education*? Does it make a difference if the discussion is being posted anonymously? Why or why not?
3. Suppose that John somehow finds the thread on Facebook and decides to lodge a formal complaint with the department chair or college dean. If you were the chair or dean, how should you resolve the situation?
4. If you saw that one of your colleagues was engaged in this type of discussion on Facebook, how would you react? How would you react if one of your graduate students were engaged in this type of discussion? What, if anything, should the academic community do to promote and protect student (and faculty!) privacy in the age of the internet?
5. How should an adviser/instructor respond to a student's behavior that she considers frustrating, rude, insulting, or otherwise inappropriate? How should Dr. Stone respond to John's comment about her being an ineffective adviser?

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\* An earlier version of this case was presented at the at the 2010 National Academic Advisor's Association (NACADA), North Central Region 6 Conference, and the at the 2010 NACADA Annual Conference